

UNUSUAL DECEMBER-JANUARY BREEDING AT THE GARSEN HERONRY, KENYA

The Garsen Heronry, described by North (1956), is situated in *Terminalia* thicket in a large floodpan beside the west bank of the lower Tana, 3 km south of the village of Itsowe and some 15 km south of Garsen, Coast Province. Breeding occurs after seasonal flooding from the river. A lagoon up to a kilometre across is created, and this becomes sealed off and may take several months to dry out. Typically, flooding occurs during April-May as a result of the long rains in central Kenya, and according to local information the colony is commonly active between May and September. Previous accounts of breeding (North 1956, Britton 1974, P.L. Britton pers. comm. and MACC pers. obs.) have all been based on observations between late June and August. The short rains do not usually raise the level of the Tana greatly, and the heronry area typically remains dry from October to March.

After the heaviest October-November rainfall inland for 21 years, the lower Tana valley experienced widespread floods at the end of 1982. We checked the Itsowe area on 12 January 1983, and found the level of the river still very high. The heronry lagoon was flooded to a depth of 1-3 m, and much breeding was in progress. We estimated the size of the colony as at least 4000 pairs. Some 10-20 per cent of the nests were in thicket flooded to 0.5-1 m immediately inside the river bank. The majority, however, were above deeper water in an island of thicket which covered several hectares and extended to a height of 7-8 m. This island was situated about 400 m out in the lagoon, and was approachable only with difficulty by canoe through thick beds of the tall rhizomatous grass *Echinocloa stagnina*.

Most nests were positioned 2-6 m above the water, in the dominant small *Terminalia brevipes* trees or in clumps of *Combretum constrictum* on the periphery of the thicket. Most of the birds breeding were herons - Yellow-billed Egret¹ being the dominant species - followed by Purple Heron, Squacco Heron and Night Heron (see Table 1). The great majority of nests contained chicks, and most of the young Purple Herons and Night Herons were already very large. Other species breeding were Open-billed Stork *Anastomus lamelligerus* (200+ pairs), African Spoonbill *Platalea alba* (100+ pairs), Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* (50+ pairs) and Darter *Anhinga rufa* (30+ pairs). Sacred Ibis *Threskiornis aethiopica* and Long-tailed Cormorants *Phalacrocorax africanus* were present, but few appeared to have nests.

Itsowe was visited again by MACC and DJP on 20 June 1983. Further flooding had evidently occurred during April-May, and breeding was again in progress, although on a rather smaller scale than in January, and this time it was confined to the main island of thicket. Over 2000 nests were estimated, most with eggs, but some had very small chicks. In contrast to January, the dominant species was the Cattle Egret, and there were very few Purple Herons or Night Herons (Table 1). About 100 pairs each of Sacred Ibis, Darters and Long-tailed Cormorants were nesting, and tens of pairs of African Spoonbills, but there were fewer Glossy Ibis than in January, and no Open-billed Storks were seen with nests.

Earlier estimates of colony size, in June 1974 and July 1981, gave 2000 pairs and 5000+ pairs respectively (Britton 1974, MACC pers. obs.). Activity in January 1983 was clearly comparable. Assuming that these water birds are typically geared to respond to breeding conditions during April-August, and moult presumably about July-November, the ability of so many to take breeding advantage of the November-December floods is surprising. Were the birds involved individuals which had returned to a state of breeding readiness particularly early? We do not know how successful the colony was during June-July 1982, but

¹Scientific names of herons are given in Table 1

in view of the moderately good 'long' rains in the upper Tana catchment, and unusually heavy coastal rain, we assume that it was active then. Some species were clearly able to utilize the unseasonal breeding opportunity better than others. Purple Herons and Night Herons were well represented at the colony in January 1983, with most young in nests further advanced than those of other species. The very minor involvement of these two species during the second 1983 breeding period would suggest that they had been particularly successful at the beginning of the year; indeed, most adults could already have been in moult by May-June. Cattle Egrets, on the other hand, were surprisingly absent from the colony in January 1983, and this species evidently succeeded in breeding only at the usual time of year.

TABLE 1

Estimated contribution of various species to the total breeding heron number at the Garsen colony during January and June 1983

Species	12 January	20 June
Grey Heron <i>Ardea cinerea</i>	<1%	None
Purple Heron <i>A. purpurea</i>	25%	<1%
Squacco Heron <i>Ardeola ralloides</i>	15%	5%
Cattle Egret <i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	<1%	70%
Great White Egret <i>Egretta alba</i>	3%	<1%
Black Heron <i>E. ardesiaca</i>	<1%	1%
Little Egret <i>E. garzetta</i>	1%	2%
Yellow-billed Egret <i>E. intermedia</i>	50%	20%
Night Heron <i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	5%	1%
Colony size (pairs of herons)	4000+	2000+

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A MELANISTIC COMMON SNIPE *GALLINAGO GALLINAGO* NEAR NAIROBI:
AN EXAMPLE OF 'SABINE'S SNIPE'?

In the late afternoon of 30 December 1982 I flushed a very dark snipe *Gallinago* sp. from short grass at Athi River sewage ponds, near Nairobi. The bird was obviously a Common Snipe *G. gallinago*, being of the correct size, shape and proportions, and having the typical fast zigzagging flight, loud harsh call and long bill of that species. A normally coloured *G. gallinago* was also present for comparison. The dark bird was flushed several times, giving excellent views in flight at close range. It was remarkable in having no trace of white anywhere in the plumage, and it appeared almost entirely sooty black. The head and upperparts, including the upperwings, were sooty black, with no pale longitudinal lines on the back which did, however, have some